

The Ostrich Race

by Tony Chandler

The ostrich was nervous, and Buck Brannan couldn't blame him. Shoot, he was nervous too.

But it was the big bird that had the Mark VI 'Ram-Jets' strapped snug around its feathered body. Still, the rocket pack would put them on an equal footing with the Drakan warrior and his swift six-winged mount.

Buck rubbed the two-day stubble on his chin.

He was standing on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon staring at the first auburn rays of the morning sun in a cloudless sky, dressed out in his protective suit complete with helmet. Strapped to his waist was his trusty blaster, the equal to the Drakan's weapon.

And of course, he had a water-gun. After all, the fate of planet Earth was in the balance."

This is the third time this month," Buck said to Charles Hart, Leader of Section Three. And his Team Commander for the race.

"We must meet each challenge," Charles replied.

Buck rolled his eyes. "But why us? Why is it always Earth? Why can't it be Aurelias III, or Cygnus Prime? Or even little Xara Cita?!" His eyes narrowed with anger. "Is it our water they want? Or some rare and precious metal?" Buck growled under his breath. But he knew the terrible answer even as Commander Hart spoke.

"There's an 'acute and universal' shortage of babes. You know that. It's bigger than just a single planet's fate."

The two men stared at each other.

"You must understand how serious this thing is," Charles said.

"That's more responsibility than any one man should have on his shoulders," Buck shouted.

"You're the best. You're all we have."

Buck looked away, moisture forming in his gray eyes. "What if I fail?"

"It's too terrible to even contemplate." Charles shook his head.

"Tell me," Buck whispered.

Charles sighed deeply with the enormity of the tragic thought. "Beautiful wives everywhere... gorgeous girl-friends. Leggy models. And especially young and stunning actresses ... and singers." A somber pause filled the air. "...will be gone. Forever."

"You don't mean!!!" Buck shouted angrily.

"Yes, the only date you and I would be able to get after such a catastrophe would be with rather 'ugly' dames. IF we were lucky."

"We can't let that happen," Buck spat with vehemence.

"It's all up to you." The Section Leader pointed to Alex the 'rocketized' ostrich. "And the ostrich."

"Why don't we stop this 'Intergalactic Babe Trade' at it's ugly source?" Buck seethed.

"Impossible."

Buck's eyes narrowed with disbelief.

"It's true." Charles sighed. "It's bigger than planet Earth, my courageous friend. It's bigger even than the Galactic Council."

"Then the universe is doomed," Buck whispered.

"We must never give up, Brannan. Never." Charles grabbed him sternly and shook his shoulders, staring straight into his eyes. "Life without babes, is not life!"

"I understand," Buck said, his mind now clear.

Charles smiled as he patted him on the cheek. "OK, OK. Have you been briefed on the rules for this Drakan challenge race?"

"Remind me," Buck said. Rubbing his hands through his graying temples, the Section Leader pointed at the Drakan. "Really two rules. The person who finishes the race wins."

"I think that's only one rule," Buck snarled.

Charles gave him that 'I was saving the really bad news for last' look. The Commander sighed. "Rule two. Only one of you finishes. Period."

"Ouch," Buck elaborated.

"Now, notice his weapon of choice." Charles pointed at the nine-foot Drakan as he sat astride his beast.

Buck surveyed him with a calm, steady appraisal.

The Drakan was big. His broad chest rose and fell like an elastic mountain, his bulging biceps stretching the leather sleeves tight as if they were a second skin. The Drakan's jet black hair fell down to his waist behind his head. He stared back at Buck with deadly intent with his three black eyes.

Buck growled under his breath.

"That thing that looks like a simple staff is not a simple staff."

"Go on," Buck growled again.

"It's a Sarpon laser lance. He can fire it one-handed like a needle rifle, or he can jab you with it from close range. Either way, if it hits you. Pow!" Charles clapped his hands together for emphasis.

Buck tore his electric gaze from his opponent and stared at Charles.

"Pow?" Buck repeated questioningly.

"Pow!" Charles repeated, without the clap.

"Oh boy," Buck swallowed.

"But that's OK," Charles added.

"I bet," Buck said.

"It is. See, ol' Drakan over there ain't ever gonna' get close enough to jab you. And..." Charles smiled. "You and Alex there are gonna' run circles around 'em." He patted Buck triumphantly on the shoulder. "That's why I'm here."

Buck looked confused. Charles recognized the familiar look.

"See, these Drakan challenge races have a loophole. Each participant gets their weapon of choice, that's straightforward enough. And, each participant must ride their planet's champion bird." Charles winked knowingly. "Now, there's where we got 'em. On Drakan, birds and bird-like creatures dominate other creatures. They're huge and carnivorous. All through Drakan culture birds and bird-like species are highly revered." Charles smiled wider. "So, when they challenged us, we had no choice but to choose an ostrich."

"Only bird big enough to carry a man," Buck said.

"Right!" Charles turned and stared at the six-winged Cxatha. "So, per Drakan rules, we had to 'enable' the ostrich to fly in their challenge race.

"Enable it." Buck looked back at the nervous avian. "And just how well does an ostrich fly?"

The Section Leader laughed, a chuckling kind of 'haw-haw' that didn't really sound like it had humor, but it did have satire. And irony in its highest form.

"You haven't flown it!" Buck shouted, recognizing the Commander's guffaw.

"Shhh, no, no. We didn't have time. It took forever just to find the right kind of harness and controls."

Buck's eyes showed the first raw glint of total panic. "How am I going to control it?!?" he shouted again.

"With speed," he answered simply.

"With speed?" Buck repeated.

"Just remember, don't press the SuperCharger unless you really have to."

Buck stared numbly at him.

"It'll fry the aft end of yon bird to a rapidly overdone and toasty black. And I imagine same yon bird would begin wild and violent movements in kind response, which I imagine might make it hard for this noble rider to hang on." Charles smiled the smile of a used-car salesman icing the deal.

"Those ugly women are lookin' better by the minute," Buck chimed.

"You got it made, kid. Those are Mark VI RAM-Jets. Two of 'em." The insincere smile got more so. "Do you know what kind of thrust those babies are capable of?"

"Not enough." Buck shook his head.

"Listen." Charles put his arms around Buck's shoulders and squeezed. "The Drakan won't be able to keep up with you. You'll fly circles around him." He pointed his finger at Buck's face. "You're not flying an ostrich, you're flying a 'rocket bird!'"

Buck patted the rocketized ostrich.

"And, you'll have time to get in the one shot you need. Pow!" Charles added.

"Can I just stun him?" Buck asked.

"Sure, kid. All the rules say is that only one participant finishes within the allotted time." Charles shrugged. "Twenty minutes. And if you stun 'em with that, he's out for at least an hour."

For the first time Buck felt his confidence returning. But his face grew hard as he patted the blaster strapped to his left hip.

"There's one thing you haven't told me," Buck barked.

Charles eyed him strangely.

"What about the water-gun?"

The Commander laughed out loud. "Oh, that." He laughed louder. "That's just in case."

Buck was not amused. "In case 'what?!'"

"In case of fire," Charles shrugged innocently.

Buck pointed the water-gun at him.

"Hey, careful with that, it's high-powered. And it's all you'll be able to handle flying that fast," Commander Hart said. The Section Leader shook and nodded his head at the same time, finally forcing the motion into a semi-positive nodding. "C'mon, kid. C'mon. We know you can do this thing."

Buck took a deep, cleansing breath. He let it out slowly, confidently. He smiled as he stared at the sheer sides of the Grand Canyon before them. The designated race track.

"Let's go."

The Drakan judge waved his arm a single time, and the nameless Drakan warrior kicked his steed. The two leapt into the air toward the south rim.

"They'll start from that side. You'll begin the race by racing straight at each other," Charles explained. "Once you're within firing range, you can steer away. I suggest you fly low down, toward the canyon bottom."

A flash of insight struck Buck. "How do I control a flying ostrich?"

"With speed," Charles growled with impatience. As they walked toward the captive bird, he took Buck's hand and placed it on top of the wide leather strap that encircled the ostrich. "You'll place your right hand on this small joystick, it controls direction, pitch, and yaw. The two buttons are for speed. Don't press them for too long or the SuperCharger kicks in. See."

Buck nodded as he placed his hand on the minuscule control.

"I'd suggest placing your left hand under the strap until you get the hang of it. After you do, your legs should be able to hold you on."

Buck looked at him, doubt on his face.

"Velcro," Charles said.

Buck nodded. He now knew why the extra-large Velcro strips had been sewn onto the legs of his suit. He carefully inspected the Velcro strips that had been fused onto the ostrich.

"Permanently attached to the skin. If it comes off, the ostrich's skin does too."

"Ouch." Buck nodded.

Alex the ostrich became surprisingly still. Buck was carefully lowered by another tractor beam until just above the plump, plumed back. Buck eyed the de-feathered skin where the Velcro was now fused. He signaled, and with a quick motion, his legs merged with the ostrich.

With a loud 'scrubbing' sound.

He leaned over and put his entire weight on the Velcro, the strong bond held him securely in place. Buck reached with his left hand and worked it deep under the wide leather strap. He turned and gave a 'thumbs up' to Charles. Then his right hand was on the joystick.

The Section Leader backed slowly away even as the timer began its final countdown.

And hit zero.

Buck squeezed the joystick and both buttons even as the tractor beam holding Alex dropped.

They shot forward in a blur of motion amid the earth-shaking thunder of the twin RAM-Jets. And faintly, just above the rockets, Charles heard the wailing scream of Alex. A few scattered feathers dislodged by the sudden burst of speed curled lazily around the twin plumes of exhaust as ostrich and rider grew smaller in the distance.

The other side of the canyon wall began to grow rapidly closer in Buck's vision.

But there was a problem. And it wasn't the Drakan and his mount speeding towards him.

Right before his eyes, tragedy beckoned. With the immense speed of the RAM-Jets and the hurricane force of air buffeting Buck and his mount, the serpentine neck of the ostrich began to oscillate back and forth with increasing force.

Swinging left and right like some kind of weapon. With an ostrich's head at the end. Screaming.

Buck leaned backwards, away from it.

For if that swinging, beaked pendulum struck him, it would easily break his jaw.

Or worse.

As Buck watched with horrified fascination as the ostrich's neck and head swung faster, just out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Drakan take aim.

Buck jerked the joystick hard left.

Ostrich and man became rolling in a blur. Over and over they rolled.

But they were still rocketing straight forward.

To their death.

The Drakan fired, even as Buck realized his mistake through his dizzied mind.

He pushed it down. Hard.

And felt his stomach leave his body.

Now Buck's screams mixed with the ostrich's otherworldly cry. Both heard faintly, almost surrealistically, just above the thunder of the RAM-Jets.

The Drakan warrior kicked his fanged steed, who folded his six wings. Both dropped like a nightmarish raptor and rider upon their unsuspecting prey.

Buck could barely make out the Colorado river as it drew nearer. Somehow it was all spinning before his eyes. Even as he tried to stop screaming, he felt the back of the ostrich's suddenly renewed oscillations brush his nose. He leaned back, and inadvertently pulled back on the joystick.

It saved their lives.

In a flash ostrich and rider went from nose-down power dive to streaking straight up for the heavens. And they were still rolling.

Buck felt and heard the sound of ripping as the Velcro began to separate because of the intense G forces hammering their bodies with merciless force.

Alex felt it too.

The ostrich's screams/squeals overpowered the roar of the rockets.

And his head began oscillating harder with dangerous force, back and forth. Ever so slowly the long, serpentine neck began to be forced farther and farther back, forcing Buck to arch his back and lean farther and farther back, which in turn caused him to pull harder and harder on the joystick.

Until.

He pressed both buttons with a firm and solidly panicked grip.

The SuperCharger kicked in.

The Drakan fired again.

The laser blast missed Buck by millimeters, searing his right arm with its closeness.

Alex was seared too, but not by the Drakan.

The Drakan streaked by, a blur of hair and wings.

Underneath him, Buck suddenly felt the ostrich come 'alive.'

The ostrich began flapping its wings and kicking its legs so hard that Buck lost his balance. First to the right, then to the left, his body jerked and rocked with the bird's wild motions. It was like riding a wild, bucking Brahma bull.

And this bull was mad!

Without his realizing it, with each violent jerk, Buck's hand jerked the joystick.

Everything got real intense.

Real fast.

In all the confusion, with the gut-wrenching movements of their mindless flight, and the violent and wild motions of the ostrich he was riding, Buck knew the Drakan was still trying to kill him.

He was close.

Somewhere.

In a blur of motion, as the open sky was replaced by the ground and river, and then the sheer, rock wall, and then the sky again, somewhere in that steadily increasing blur was a spot that Buck discerned must be the Drakan.

He was shooting at him.

In a bold move. And a stupid one. Buck released his left hand and drew his blaster.

He fired.

And barely missed the swinging head and neck before him.

Alex stiffened, although the head and neck continued their dangerous swinging motion.

Buck's eyes focused, finally. He straightened the joystick, flying level and forward for the first time since takeoff.

This was his chance! He leaned forward, seeking the Drakan, to determine his position.

It was almost his undoing.

The ostrich's skull smacked him across the right side of his face.

Many people know that in a tornado or hurricane, the sheer force of the wind can turn a small piece of wood into a projectile that can pierce a solid concrete wall. That projectile was the ostrich's head.

The sheer force of the air buffeting them had now used the ostrich's head and swung it into Buck's face.

Both human and bird immediately lost consciousness.

The blaster fell from his limp hand as they began to dive.

Just below them, the Drakan was urging his steed upward, aiming his lance even as Buck and Alex rolled downward.

On a collision course.

The Drakan's scream jerked Buck back to reality.

A harsh reality.

Right before his horrified eyes the Drakan warrior lifted his arms before his face as if to ward off the impending doom.

Buck screamed.

At the last instant he pulled back on the joystick.

But it was too late.

For Alex. And the Drakan warrior.

The ostrich's plump, round body hit the Drakan squarely in the chest and face.

The result was immediate. And horrifying.

The ostrich exploded.

Buck felt the violent impact below him, he heard the Velcro rip with a sickening sound. Slowly, he forced his eyes to look down.

He was now riding a leather strap, connected to a pair of RAM-Jets. A few, black feathers stuck to the Velcro were all that remained of Alex.

Buck threw up.

Which is not advisable inside a helmet.

With intense effort he opened his visor, and began guiding his feathered strap to the finish line. Within minutes he crossed it to the cheers of the crowds.

But Buck felt empty. Especially underneath.

He powered down the rockets as Charles came running up to him.

"You did it! You did it!"

Buck shook his head somberly. "What happened to the Drakan?"

Charles waved his hand. "Oh, he was strapped to his mount, so he didn't fall off. He's still unconscious with two broken arms, several cracked ribs, most of his teeth knocked out. And he'll have to have some feathers surgically removed from his body later. Other than that, he'll live."

Buck looked down at the empty strap laying on the ground between the silent engines.

"Cheer up kid, you'll get a medal for this."

"I don't deserve a medal. Alex does, he gave more than I did." Buck choked back his tears.

Charles wrapped his arm around Buck's shoulders. "Come on kid, that's just 'survivor's syndrome' talking. You know, 'why me, why did I survive?' Hey, you deserve that medal! Good lookin' women all over this planet are safe, once again!" His voice grew lower. "It's sad about Alex. But life goes on."

Buck looked away. "I don't want it."

"Now, now. Look at it this way, kid," Charles said reflectively.

They looked at each other.

"A live hero is better off than a dead ostrich."

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